

Cross Cultural Cosmos

International Corporate and Business Communication and Behavior

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Working with a Foreign Culture

The global financial crisis has moved economic power from America and western Europe to Asia. Emerging Asia rebounded from recession much faster than the developed world and its banking systems and debt dynamics are much healthier. Asian businesses are now working within their own region. They have realized that the "western" way of doing business is no longer the only way. The western businesses want to play in this game also but need to know the ground rules in order to reap the benefits. Only the smart western businesses invest the time and effort to learn about the culture in which they want to market their product or service. Business leaders who say they know how to do business with foreign cultures may have a shock coming to them. Business cultures, stereotypes, preconceptions, ethnocentricity, have all evolved. What was effective in another country 10, or even five, years ago, may no longer be so.

Conflict between cultures has defined much of human history -- from tribal turf wars and imperial conquests, to clashes of religion and lifestyle. Where different values meet, confusion and unrest can follow. The same continues as powerful global companies move into local areas which are reaching out for available technology, information, and economic benefits.

Glocalization - "Think locally, act globally" - involves the managed meeting of the growing global arena with localized, everyday life. Its goal is to ensure a globalized world as a stable and integrated place, while also protecting the cultural heritage of local areas. The pairing of glocalization and business originated in Japan during the 1980s. In this concept, it addressed the adaptation of a global product to fit a local market. By 2000, the term had become a buzzword in big business, with countless companies looking for ways to glocalize everything from soft drinks to websites. After all, if you have a product with international potential, what would be the best way to convince local consumers to buy it? Would you introduce it as is or adapt it to meet the consumers' tastes and needs? The marketing, funding and infrastructure behind a product or service may come from a global corporation, but the local level dictates what finished form that product will take.

High- and Low-Context Cultures: High-context cultures are characterized by extensive information networks among family, friends, associates, and even clients. Their relationships are close and personal. This extensive background knowledge is automatically brought to bear in giving meanings to events and communications. Nothing that happens to them can be described as an isolated event; everything is connected to meaningful context. Low-context cultures, on the other hand, tend to compartmentalize their lives and relationships. They permit little interference of irrelevant information. Thus in order to give detailed meaning to an event, they require detailed information in a communication. The context must be explicit in the message. Low-context cultures use language with great precision and economy. Every word is meaningful. In high-context cultures, language is promiscuous, since words have relatively less value, they are spent in great sums. High-and low-context cultures have radically different views of reality. And the further apart they are on primary cultures, but also between different professional and functional cultures within a single primary culture.

Monochronic and Polychronic Time: As Edward and Mildred Hall have noted, "It is impossible to know how many millions of dollars have been lost in international business because monochronic and polychronic people do not understand each other or even realize that two such different time systems exist" (Hall & Hall, 1989, p. 16). Monochronic time is one-track linear, people do one thing at a time. Polychronic time is multi-track circular, it allows many things to happen simultaneously, with no particular end in sight. Monochronic time is tightly compartmentalized: schedules are almost sacred. Polychronic time is open-ended: completing the task or communication is more important than adhering to a schedule. People from polychronic and monochronic cultures have the same difficulties adjusting to one another as people from high-context and low-context cultures. In fact, polychronic time is characteristic of high-context people and monochronic time is characteristic of low-context people. Monochronic people tend to sequence communications as well as tasks. They would not be inclined, for instance, to interrupt a phone conversation in order to greet a third person. Polychronic people can carry on multiple conversations simultaneously - indeed, they would consider it rude not to do so.

Past, Present, and Future Orientations: In general, cultures are either future-oriented or past-oriented. That is, activities in the present are either designed to influence future events or likely to be influenced by past events. In the United States, the present is heavily influenced by the short-termed future. Asian cultures tend to be oriented toward a more distant future. Mexicans and many Latin cultures, on the other hand, are more heavily influenced by the past.

The power of integrity, dignity, efficiency, and elegance in communication and behavior

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Business Implications: Like context, time is variable across all levels of culture - social, professional, and functional, and its implications in the business environment are almost endless: management of appointments, agendas, schedules, decision making, lead times, deadlines, and much more. Some of the most important time differences have to do with personal and business relationships. Polychronic people tend to be more group-oriented in keeping with their high context orientation. They see relationships as deep and long term, spanning past, present, and future. They seek out business relationships that offer this orientation. Monochronic cultures often value relationships according to more practical, future oriented criteria - even discard relationships that don't seem useful to future business goals. Promotions are based on somewhat subjective criteria linked to one's network of relationships. In contrast, Canadians and Americans link promotion to achievements in the near past and likely success in the near future.

Negotiating: Is negotiating done by an individual or a team and will the negotiators have the authority to make a firm decision? How important is it to create an ambience of good feelings and harmony? How important is it for people within this culture to like the people with whom they are doing business? Are business deals made verbally or by contract? How direct can you be when dealing with this culture? Is a deadline always a deadline - or should it be considered only a flexible guideline? What is the negotiation style of people in this culture - do they have a fallback position, expect the other party to reveal their own interests and priorities first, enjoy the fine art of haggling, or look for a compromise position? Do they spend a great deal of time on the emotional and dramatic effects of negotiating or do they rely on a strictly logical approach? Are they likely to use a sense of obligation as part of their negotiation tactics? Is asking questions a primary bargaining strategy or is questioning interpreted as prying and inappropriately nosy? Are decisions made primarily on a cost-benefit basis or on the basis of saving someone from embarrassment? How does this culture use silence in the negotiating process? How do they feel about lawyers attending the negotiations?

Advertising, Marketing, Selling: Language: Do all the words, phrases, sayings and metaphors translate directly to the target language? Humor, innuendo, and implicit meanings can be lost in translation. When translating into another language, carefully consider the variations in language. If it is to be an Arabic brochure or website is it aimed at Tunisians or Iraqis, Egyptians or Yemenis? Even within relatively homogenous regions, cross cultural differences exist. The style of the language in relation to the target audience also needs proper cross cultural assessment. Pictures: Images carry subtle cultural messages that can speak volumes about your company or product. Pictures or images have certain connotations that can attract or repel viewers. For example, a picture of the Director behind a desk in an office will be fine for a seniority respecting society, but for an egalitarian society it is better to show the Director mixing with staff. Colors: Choosing the wrong color for your logo or background will not always have disastrous consequences, but avoiding them is always advisable. For instance, white should be avoided in Japan, where it is commonly associated with mourning, and in , red is auspicious. Content: This is not only important for proper transfer of information such as dates, currencies, and units of measurement but also for the presenting the correct image. If a company is marketing itself in a culture that respects seniority and hierarchy, readers will want to see information on senior members, along with their titles and rank so they can evaluate them on their professional qualifications, experience and contacts.

Using Interpreters and Translators: when a company works with foreign clients that speak English poorly or not at all, it can create uncertainty, misunderstanding and a barrier to perform and achieve service your company needs. There are many verbal and non-verbal cues that "westerners" do not understand about foreign cultures. It is essential that interpreters have an excellent knowledge and understanding of the languages they use, that their skills require a great deal of training, and that they are familiar with verbal and non-verbal communication, including vocabulary, local expressions, customs, culture and awareness, of both cultures (yours and target culture). Do not try to save money by hiring somebody who is not fully qualified – mistakes could result in negative business and legal ramifications.

The best solution when a company is involved with a non-English speaking client or with cases that involve services in the international arena is to use a professional language expert. Remember people from Spain use different expressions and vocabulary than people from Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico or even Argentina. The language is the same but the context and meaning of the expressions sometimes are different. This situation is very similar to what Americans, British, Australians or South Africans encounter among themselves when each culture uses their own expressions and writing styles.

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